

A Journey of Hindu Women from *Shakti* to *Sati* in Ancient India

Dr.Pallavi Thakur

Assistant Professor, SOLC,
Sharda University, Greater Noida

Abstract

Hinduism which has always formed a major section of Indian society has been highly religious and looked upon its religious texts as a guide to code of conduct. However the modern Hindu society, seems to be enveloped by materialism are side-lining the essence of being a Hindu. Women are pushed to a cul-de-sac of identity crisis. Dowry deaths, female foeticide, girl-child discrimination, domestic violence, sexual exploitation are rampant in it which is not in coherence with the Hindu dictates. The grim situation forces us to ponder on the reasons which transformed the attitude of Hindu society towards its women. The present paper tries to examine the status of Hindu women in ancient India. It is an attempt to trace the reasons responsible for a gradual change in the outlook of Hindus towards it women.

Key Words: *education, rituals, marriage, streedhan, sati, child marriage*

Introduction

Hinduism emerged as the basic religion of India during Vedic age. The period witnessed the emergence of myriad Hindu scriptures. The period of ancient Indian society can be divided into two parts- The Vedic Period (c.4000 B.C. to 1000 B.C.) and the age of the Smritis (c.800 B.C. to 300 AD). Aryans were the inhabitants of Vedic India. They were not the original residents of India. Their literary works, known as the Vedas, gave us for the first time a comprehensive picture of the social and religious ideas as well as political and economic condition (Majumdar 2003). The Aryans followed the Vedic rules propounded by the Vedic texts. The Vedas have three classes- The Samhitas, The Brahmanas and The Aranyakas. The Samhitas have four different texts- The Rigveda Samhita, The Atharvaveda Samhita, The Samaveda Samhita and The Yajurveda Samhita. The Rig Veda Samhita was written by priests for specific needs of the ritual services (Embree 5). The scholars and sages of ancient India formulated the laws governing the code of conduct both for men and women. All these laws are collected in eighteen Dharmashastras. The ancient India followed the precepts as given by various religious texts.

1. Vedic Period

The analysis of the status of Hindu women is done on the basis of literature review. The Vedic texts as analysed by myriad researchers conclude that Hindu women enjoyed freedom and independence in Vedic Period. Women were found enjoying rights in all the streams of life. We find them as scholars and warriors. Women had the right to property and education. Women were treated equivalent to men and had freedom to develop and nourish their identity as per their choice. Various customs and traditions imbibed by the Hindu society gave full and active participation to its women. The rights and privileges enjoyed by women have been individually discussed below:

- **Right to Education**

Education is essential for a society for its growth. It helps in removing ignorance and substitutes it with knowledge. The society which is blind to education is often seen governed by rigid fundamentalist and conventional social code of conduct. In contemporary time, Afghanistan is the best example of it. When people become rigid to the extent of becoming inhuman there can be no scope of development.

Vedic age in India had a flexible approach towards its people. Women in Vedic age enjoyed the right to education. These women not only composed hymns but were also well-versed in sacred texts. Women also learnt music and dancing (Choudhri 1978). They could read, write and acquired the knowledge of Vedas. Many Vedic women emerged as scholars, philosophers, artists and poets. Along with prayers for a son are found those for the gift of a beautiful and intelligent daughter. Girls' education passes through the stages of Upanayana and Brahmacharya leading to the marital state. Among the scholars of the period are ladies such as Lopamudra, Vishvavara, SikataNivavari and Gosha. Sarvanukramnikalists as many as twenty women among the "seers" or authors of the Rig Veda' showing that possibilities. (Tharakan :p.117). These women scholarsexemplify the progressive nature of the Vedic age which laid emphasis on human development as a whole rather than a particular gender. Not only the women were educated but also they gave society 'the code of conduct'. Several of them played very important roles in the formulation of social policies and code of conduct. Maitrayee, Gargi and Leelavati were not only highly learned women, they were equally well versed in higher mathematic astronomy and the humanities (Lakshmi 2011). Hence women acquired and disseminated knowledge. They not only nurtured their families but also played an active role in society.

• Religion and Women

Religion has a strong hold over any society. It acquaints a person with his identity, people, culture and traditions. It teaches him his way of life. The precepts of religion define its people's social status. Women enjoyed social recognition and were placed equivalent to men in social and religious ceremonies. Religious rituals performed by men were considered as incomplete in the absence of their wives. Men and women equally participated in Vedic rituals. Vedic sacrifices were performed jointly by husband and wife (Altekar 1959). Atharveda suggests men to make their wives equally participate in *yagya* and other rituals.

३८३७. जीवं रुदन्ति वि नयन्त्यध्वरं दीर्घामनु प्रसिति दीध्युर्नरः ।

वामं पितृभ्यो य इदं समीरिरे मयः पतिभ्यो जनये परिष्वजे ॥४६॥ काण्ड-१४ सूक्त-१ 1

The *Sukta* clearly states that women's presence is essential in religious rituals. The *yagyas* were considered incomplete in the absence of wife. The customs and traditions of Vedic age gave women an important role to play. Husbands were expected to give respect to their wives and provide them with all the necessities of life. The precepts of *Atharveda* do not portray women as weak sex but address them as *Sarswati* and *Laxmi* (3870). Many Goddesses were revered as *Shakti*-both the creator and destroyer. Child marriage and sati came much later and co-education of boys and girls (going through Upanayana and Brahmacharya) was the rule. Women could perform sacrifices independently and they were not regarded as impediments in rituals (Tharakan:p.117). Women were not considered as 'weaker sex' who could not participate in religious rituals.

• Marriage

Marriage as an institution in Vedic age did not expect women to self-abnegate. Atharveda proclaims equality between husband and wife in marital life. Men and women were asked to share responsibilities and establish a perfect balance in their conjugal life for the betterment of their family. The bride is designated as the queen of the house whose position is supreme above all the members of groom's family. She is also advised to restore all her relations with love, affection and care.

३८२२. युवं भगं सं भरतं समृद्धमृतं वदन्तावृतोद्येषु ।

ब्रह्मणस्पते पतिमस्यै रोचय चारु संभलो वदतु वाचमेताम् ॥३१॥ काण्ड-१४ सूक्त-१

The above *sukta* lays emphasis on peace and harmony in conjugal life. It advises the wife to give respect to her husband and also suggests the husband to treat his wife with reverence. Hence it can be concluded that women as wife had equal status in marital life.

Women had the right to choose their husbands and widows were allowed to remarry. K.Uma Devi illustrates in *Women's Equality in India: A Myth or Reality?* There were no child marriages and women had freedom to marry a man irrespective of caste. The concept of Ardhangini suggests that there was equal status to woman along with man, and neither was superior to the other (Uma 2000). Gifts were given to the groom as a token of love and affection in marriage but gradually the social practice got transformed into obnoxious dowry system. *Atharveda* talks about *Kanyadhan* which means a property owned by girl during her marriage. The gifts given by family and friends to bride at the time of marriage are referred to as *kanyadhan*.

३८६७. संकाशयामि वहतुं ब्रह्मणा गृहैरघोरेण चक्षुषा मित्रियेण ।

पर्याणद्धं विश्वरूपं यदस्ति स्योनं पतिभ्यः सविता तत् कृणोतु ॥१२॥

काण्ड-१४ सूक्त-२

The *Suktas* suggests all relatives and family members should accept the *kanyadhan* and wishes that it may prove beneficial to the couple in their conjugal life. The *Sukta* proves that *Kanyadhan* was not imposed on bride's parents rather it was treated as the gifts given to the bride. It also expects groom's family to accept it with love and affection. Hence it was totally the choice of the bride's family to give *Kanyadhan* in whatever form they wanted and no demands were made from groom's family.

Dharmashastra too talks about "Streedhan" which is [...] particularly related to the gifts, jewellery, clothes etc. given to the bride at the time of her marriage, usually from her relatives or friends. Dharmashastras clearly indicate that the bride had complete rights over the Streedhan-even to dispose them in case of her husband's death and yet the form Streedhan that would concretize in course of time was a serious aberration (Hasan 2014). They also enjoyed right to property. It is believed that women could inherit property during this period and that widow remarriage was common (Saikia 2008). Sati, a social practice in the age of smritis, was not a part of the Vedic society. *Rigveda* provides a sati hymn which has umpteen interpretations. Kane quotes it as, 'Let these women, whose husbands are worthy and are living, enter the house with ghee (applied) as corrylimum (to their eyes). Let these wives first step into the pyre, tearless without any affliction and well adorned. [*Rig Veda* X.18.7] [Kane 199-200]. One interpretation of this verse could be that it is preaching sati. However some scholars claim that the whole verse has been misinterpreted. Three sanskrit words 'agne' or 'agneh' and 'agre' have misled the interpreters. 'Agne' or 'agneh' means 'pyre' and 'agre' means to the front. Hence the verse specifies that the wife has to enter the pyre (*agneh*) and go to the front (*arge*).

Child marriage didn't exist during Vedic age.

• Women as Warriors

Women have also been quoted as warriors in *Rig Veda*. Women were trained to become warriors. The period mentions gallant women combatants who fought with valour in the battle field. We thus hear of Mudgalini winning a battle, Vishpala who lost her leg and Vadhrimati who lost her hand in battle. Vadhrimati and Sasiyasi are also mentioned for their heroism in the battlefield (Bhattacharya 1992). *Rig-Vedic* period reflects a relatively egalitarian society where hierarchy on the basis of socio-economic factors, castes and gender did not thrive.

2. The Age of Smritis and The Hindu Women

The Age of Smritis saw a considerable change in the whole outlook of society and the status of Hindu women. Many important religious texts were written in this period. These books include the *Shatras* or legal texts such as *Manu Smriti* c.200BC, the *Yajnavalkya Smriti* c. 300AD, and the *Narada Smriti* c. 400 AD, as well as treatises on administration such as *Arthashastra* by Kautilya, and *Nibandhs* or commentaries on individual legal texts which were written between 700 and 1700 AD (Saikia 2008). These texts pruned the responsibilities of women and gave them a secondary status in the society. Patriarchy dominated the society and women were considered as despicable objects. Men were warned not to trust women and put them under

their thumb. Women were commanded to spend their lives always under a sheltering tree-father, husband and son. They lost their identity and became a nonentity.

- **Stringent Laws Made for Women**

Manusmriti dictates the most stringent laws for Hindu women. It cautioned the society to guard and control women because they have a malicious character. It demeaned their status by questioning their morality. G. Buhler expounds in *The Laws of Manu, Sacred Books of the East*, the basic rules for women's behavior, as expressed in the Laws of Manu, ca. A.D. 200, stress the need to control women because of their malicious character. Because of their passion for men, their mutable temper, and their natural heartlessness, they become disloyal towards their husbands, however carefully they are guarded in this [world]. Knowing their disposition, which the Lord of creatures instilled in them at the creation, [every] man should most strenuously exert himself to guard them (Bhuler1964). It's surprising to see that the Hindu society wholeheartedly accepted such stringent laws of Manu. They didn't question the inhuman precepts which not only tarnished the morality of women but also demeaned them to the status of a slave.

- **Marriage**

Caste system prevailed which affected all the spheres of life. The society was divided into four castes: Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. A profession was attributed to each caste and any alteration in it was prohibited. Marriage was permissible within one's own caste. However men could marry women belonging to lower caste. Such marriages were called AnulobhaVivaha. Education was not meant for women. Patriarchy flourished and Hindu women were pushed to a submissive position. Women also lost their right to education. Upanyan or the sacred thread ceremony, which was performed to initiate a person into the Vedic studies, was prohibited in the case of women and Shudra by the Manu code (Saikia 2008). The Smritis also denied right to property to women.

- **Child Marriage**

The concept of child marriage also flourished. The law-givers of ancient India had enunciated the social conduct associated with the marriage of a girl child and also pronounced the verdict against the defaulters. According to Marichi, a father who gives in marriage a girl of eight attains heaven, the giver of a girl of the nine Vaikuntha, and one who gives his daughter before she reaches ten, attains Brahma Loka. The father of a girl married after puberty goes straight to hell (Usha 2005). Hence, it was socially expected to get a girl married around the age of puberty otherwise it was considered as dishonour both on the girl and her father. Usha Sharma concludes that another evil institution which led to the subjugation of Hindu women was child-marriage. [...] A girl whom her father does not give away in marriage three years after puberty can take the law into her own hands, and look for her husband herself. Manu does not say it is sinful for a girl to be married after puberty, but all the later law-givers pronounce a curse on the father in whose house a daughter matures before marriage and condemn such a girl to the status of a sudra woman (2005).

- **Sati in Hindu texts**

Sati was a social ritual prescribed for Hindu widows. They burnt themselves alive on their husband's funeral pyre to prove their devotion to him. The word Sati in its original Sanskrit is *sati* (feminine) derived from *sat* meaning "goodness" or "virtue. The term Sati thus denotes not the practice but the practitioner: the "virtuous woman" who joins her husband's death. The term carries with it associations of great virtue, personal strength and religious autonomy (Lesli 1992). *Suttee* as westerners have often spelled the word, describes the ritual according to which a Hindu wife follows her husband to his death by ascending his pyre with him or ascending one of her own shortly afterwards (Hawley 1994). The first few references of sati which we get from Hindu texts are still a matter of debate. Many Hindu texts mention sati as the duty of women. The *Vishnumriti* grants two choices to widows, If a woman's husband dies, let her lead a life of chastity, or else mount her pyre" [Vishnumriti XXV 14] (Clayton 13). *Brahma Purana* also talks about sati as the highest duty of the woman to immolate herself after the husband [Br.P.80.75] (Seth 1979). The *Vishnu Purana* also mentions sati as the 8 queens of Krishna, who have been named with Rukmini at their head, embraced the body of Hari, and entered the funeral fire. Revati also embracing the corpse of Rama, entered the blazing pile, which was cool to her, happy in contact with her lord. Hearing these events, Ugrasena Anakadundubhi, with

Devaki and Rohini, committed themselves to the flames [Vishnu Purana 5.38](Wilson 1840). Vishnusmriti (XXV. 14) illustrates the duties of a widow. It enunciates that if a woman's husband dies, let her lead a life of chastity, or else mount his pyre (Clayton 13). *Mahabharata* also mentions many instances of sati. Pandu's second wife, named Madri, decides to commit *sati*, as do the widows of warriors and Vasudeva (Sutton 2000). Hence, Hindu texts serve as evidence to the existence of sati during the Smriti age.

The above discussions clearly explain that Hindu women were at par with men during Vedic age. Society didn't view them as subordinates to men but perceived them as equivalent to men. Vedic society was flexible and less conservative towards women. The status of women started declining during Smriti Age. Women lost their right to education, property and many inhuman practices like child marriage, sati came into existence. Patriarchy silently percolated in the social structure and became rampant. Women were pushed to an unending abyss of obsequious servility. The roots of Hindu women's subservience are casting its shadows in modern India. Women are perplexed and are found oscillating between age-old orthodox doctrines and modernity. Though women have succeeded in securing rights through constitution yet they are unable to liberate themselves from the conventional dictates adhered by the society.

Hindu religion is always known to have been inundated with Goddesses- emanating power and strength. They are revered as *Shakti*, the savior. The transformation of women's identity from Shakti to servility is more of an identity metamorphosis inflicted on women through Hinduism as a religion.

Note:

1. The Suktas have been taken from AtharvedaSamhita (With explanation in Hindi), Part2, Khand11-20. VedmurtiTaponishthPanditShriram Sharma Acharya. 5th Edition. 2002.Shantikunj:Haridwar

Works Cited

- Altekhar, A. S. 1959. *Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Bhattacharya, Sukumari. 1992. The Position of Women in Vedic Society. *JSTOR*, 19, 40 52.
- Choudhri, Ray. 1978. *Social Cultural and Economic History of Ancient India*. New Delhi: Surjeet Publications.
- G, Buhler. 1964. *The Laws of Manu, Sacred Books of the East*. 25. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Clayton, A.C. 1980. *The RigVeda and Vedic Religion*. BharatiPrakashan: Varanasi.
- Embree, Ainslie T., (Ed.), 1966. *The Hindu Tradition: Readings in Oriental Thought*. New York: Random House Inc.
- Hawley, John Stratton. 1994. *SATI The Blessing and The Curse: The Burning of the Wives in India*. Oxford University Press: New York.
- Hasan.Zeba . 2014. Blasphemy of Dowry in India and Insurgence of an Artist:Neelam Sheikh Against the System. *European Scientific Journal*. 2. 415-426.
- Kane.M.P.V. 1953.*History of Dharmashatra*. V. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute: Pune.
- Lakshmi, E.V. and Narayan, E.A. 2011.*Women Development in India*. New Delhi: Regal Publications.
- Lesli, Julia. 1992. *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*. Delhi: MotilalBanarsidass Publishers.
- Majumdar, R.C. 2003.*Ancient India*. Delhi: MotilalBanarsidass.
- Saikia, Nandita . 2008. *Indian Women A Socio-Legal Perspective*. New Delhi: Serial Publications.
- Sharma, Usha. 2005. *Marriage in Indian Society: From Tradition of Modernity*. 2. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.
- Sutton, Nicholas. 2000 .*Religious Doctrines in the Mahabharata*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Tharakan, Sophie M. and Michael Tharakan. Status of Women in India: A Historical Perspective. *Social Scientist*, Vol. 4, No. 4/5, Special Number on Women (Nov. - Dec, 1975), pp. 115-123.
- Uma, Devi K. 2000.*Women's Equality in India: A Myth or Reality*. New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House.
- Wilson, H.H. 1840. Transl. *The Vishnu Purana A System of Hindu Mythology and Tradition*. John Murray: London.